

**Senate Select Committee on School Safety Hearing on
"Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity Discrimination and School Safety"**

Plummer Park- Fiesta Hall, West Hollywood
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Testimony of Ernie McCray

Addressing LGBT Discrimination at the Elementary School Level

Members of the Select Committee:

Based on my many years as a teacher, vice-principal, and principal, school administrators won't even attempt to implement AB537 and make schools safe for gay students without your leadership and direct immediate involvement.

This is especially problematic considering that matters of sexual orientation are often considered topics for secondary schools only. But the climate on elementary campuses is also homophobic and heterosexist like the climate at the junior and senior high levels and like the climate in our society, at large.

Unfortunately schools reflect society. Gay jokes and putdowns surface in the teachers lounge as they do in other workplaces in our society, and as it is in those other places, the inappropriateness of such actions is rarely challenged or even discussed. Compounding the problem at the elementary level is society's generally held view that young children aren't ready to learn about sexual matters.

But I have dealt with five and six year olds who have called their classmates "faggots" and "homos" fully understanding the sexual connotations in their teasing, defending their actions, matter-of-factly, with: "Because he runs like a girl," or "Well, she acts just like a boy." A boy throws like a girl or plays with dolls so he's a queer. A girl throws like a boy or likes to horse around so she's a dyke. Get the picture? And the persecuted cowers in corners of the school building rather than plays or spends his or her day in the counselor's office rather than in the classroom. And since it's elementary school it's just beginning. Life will become more cruel for many as the years go by.

The children are more than ready. They've learned our negative attitudes about gay people quite well. It's the adults who aren't ready and who are in dire need of training that can help them make a difference in such a climate of disrespect.

Schools, I think, should lead society more so than reflect it. As a principal I always asked my staff to think of themselves as co-learners with their students, to share who they are as human beings and to encourage their children to do the same. It's in the sharing that creativity surfaces and grows. And it's creative minds that can change a climate of rejection in a school setting to one of acceptance and tolerance.

Teachers need training that can help them understand and respect gay people as human beings who need love as do all people so they can better ask their students to do the same. Young children will have absolutely no problems with this.

Support for such thinking has to come from you because unfortunately school districts are so involved in "Leaving no child behind," focusing on reading, writing, and arithmetic as though there are no ways to pursue such objectives other than literally sitting students down and having them read, write, and compute.

But consider this: What occurred on September 11, 2001 captured our children's undivided attention and we, as a society, rather than realizing that when they're this interested in something they're ripe for enriched relevant learning experiences, pushed to get past some of the most "teachable moments" imaginable.

But from the fires and melting steel there are many lessons. Chemistry lessons. Geometry lessons. Physics lessons. Stories of heroism. And before the smoke had died down some of the questions we are dealing with today surfaced. Questions related to the pursuit of peace and justice in a diverse world. Questions regarding civil and human rights. Questions our children must answer if their generation is to realize a hopeful world.

And as far as elementary children are concerned, especially because they are not as set in their ways as their older brothers and sisters, there has been no better time in the history of humankind than now to help them entertain new ways of living, new ways of getting along with the other peoples of the world, new ways of getting along with their LGBT peers.

Elementary children need to debate the issues of their times. They need to, on an ongoing basis, read about what people, both straight and gay, have contributed to their world. They need to draw, paint, sculpt, and write prose, poetry, and dramatic scenes that can help them fully discover who they are and what they have to offer.

Our young children already live in a diverse world. They just need assistance in living in such a world as loving and caring human beings who appreciate it enough to want to change it in a spirit of love and human understanding, something, by the way, that no previous generation has contemplated.

I would propose that you find ways, through AB537, to train school staffs to appeal to the highly creative natures and minds and humanity of elementary students so that they can explore and clarify ideas that can lead to changing the climate in their schools. They can do it. They're up for it. They love challenges. Look at how much time they devote to little electronic games, trying to reach various levels. Well, they can reach levels of human understanding that have never been realized. I know. I've been around children all my life.

But it's not going to be easy, considering the lack of real commitment on the parts of too many school officials. Like, for instance, the superintendent of San Diego City Schools who marches in the Gay Pride Parade, smiling and waving at cameras, and makes speeches about how gay and lesbian issues represent "the last revolution in civil and human rights" - and then dismantles a committee, on which I served, that was overseeing the training of teachers and making positive strides towards creating an embracing environment for gay students.

This is what you must overcome in order that contentious issues of sexual orientation and gender identity can be solved in meaningful ways in our schools. Social justice for all can happen. If you take the leadership in making it happen. Please for the sake of all children, put some teeth in AB537. It's vitally important.